

Where True Intimacy Starts in Marriage

There is no greater joy for me than falling asleep in my husband's arms. I have been married 37 years, and I am 61 years old. Yet, it feels like I just learned in the last few years how to intimately love someone.

I have always been in love with my husband, but I have never really felt the level of intimacy with him like I do now. Did losing 260 pounds make the difference?

Just physically losing weight is not the key to greater intimacy. The real key for me was losing the tons of emotional baggage I was carrying.

Whether that baggage came as a result of the weight or as the cause of the weight issue isn't really important. Discarding it was the thing that set me free to really bond with my husband.

As a former super-morbidly obese woman, I saw myself as less than an ideal woman, especially in the area of sexuality. It is a time when all of a sudden one is uncovered, exposed, open, transparent. There is nothing hidden.

For many women, especially those with any kind of weight issue, the message of skinny-is-better plays in our minds constantly. It's a message reinforced by any romantic novel, movie, television show and almost every form of commercial advertising.

Many women have internalized this whether they are of normal weight or morbidly obese. We just don't feel worthy of anyone's love. We can't believe someone would really love us if we don't look perfect. Of course, no one, not even the models, is perfect. Still, we are ashamed of our bodies and

feel our husband or any other man must be, as well.

I was aware of the reality of how this played out in my own life during a recent interview.

I've been interviewed numerous times in the last year about my book, *Sweet Grace*, and my weight loss. Arthelene Rippey, hostess of the *Homekeepers* show on CTN, asked me a question on live taping of her show in July of this year. The question caught me momentarily off guard although re-watching the show you can't really tell it. She asked if my weight gain affected my marriage.

Without skipping a beat, the answer flowed out of my heart. "I have the most wonderful husband in the world. He has loved me no matter what and is very consistent no matter what weight I am. My weight gain did not affect my marriage to a great extent except that it affected me, how I related to myself, how much I gave to the marriage and how I received love. Part of this [obesity] issue is being able to accept somebody else's consistent love in your life."

Once those words came out of my mouth, I began to see how real they were.

When we got married, there was one time my husband said to me, "I love the way you look, but please don't gain any more weight." I took that as a slam. I'm sure he meant it as a compliment. He doesn't even remember saying it.

Looking back I realize by immediately thinking the worst of any comment, I should have realized I had a monumental problem, and it wasn't my weight. It was my extreme low self-worth and the feeling that I was not worthy of being loved.

From day one of marriage, my husband has been the epitome of commitment, loyalty, hard work, peace, care and love.

However, for years, no matter how much he tried to show me he

loved me by his consistency, I couldn't accept that he really did love me. I would manufacture reasons to believe he didn't.

I'd take something he said wrong or out of context. It could be something simple, meant as an observation. I would take it wrong and cry for hours over something I thought he meant, which wasn't the case at all.

I put up emotional walls. I was scared to trust. I was afraid he was just saying he loved me, but one day the other shoe would fall, and I'd find out he didn't.

Always the guilt and shame about my weight hung over me like a dark cloud.

How could he stand to touch me when I didn't even want to look at me? And so I would avoid him, make excuses. Years later, my gynecologist gave me valuable insight. "Your husband is like all of us men. We need to know we are making our wives happy. We need to know we are enough."

Truth is, we all need to know we are enough. We all need to know as a child of God we are loved, cherished and accepted just as we are.

Intimacy is as much about loving yourself as it is about loving another person.

Jesus gave us this truth in the Great Commandment. "And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."¹

I cannot truly love another person until I love God and myself. How can I love God with everything that is in me if I don't love myself? How can I bond with my husband if I feel like I am not worth bonding to?

This issue goes to the core of us. We stop at the outward appearance and don't look any further.

God does not look on the outward appearance but on the heart.² If God's focus is on our heart, shouldn't ours be as well?

In essence, my outward appearance did reflect how I felt about myself. I wasn't sure I was worth all the energy it was going to take to get healthy. When I changed that negative mindset to a positive, things begin to change on the inside and spread to the outside of me.

Having this kind of change both internal and external helped me finally move toward true intimacy with my husband. That meant risking revealing my wants and needs. I didn't know it at the time, but my emotional vulnerability laid the foundation for true intimacy to grow.

In the past, if my husband had a long day at work and was tired, went to bed, turned off the light, rolled over and began to snore, I took it as a rejection of me. It would set up the cycle of thinking I was inadequate because of my weight, which would escalate into me taking inventory of all of my inadequacies.

Wait! Could it really be as simple as he was just tired?

We have come a long way since then to the point we reveal our wants and needs to each other.

We share the simple acknowledgment that it's been a long day, but tomorrow can start early. We know, really know, our love is a commitment we both embrace fully. We are more bonded because of honest communication and total acceptance.

Sex is an act that most any two adults can perform. Intimacy is in a totally different category. Intimacy combines the emotional and spiritual act of love with the physical, taking

things to an entirely new level. It's not about an "act." It is all about a relationship.

I have been happily married for 37 years, but I have been enormously satisfied for the last five years. Yes, part of it was because I finally surrendered my food addiction to God and began the healthy-living journey.

I stopped trying to be perfect and finally began to feel comfortable in my own skin. It is so true that love is blind, at least to the physical aspects. Love, however, is not blind to emotional barriers that keep us at arm's length from our mate. They know it. They feel it.

It's not within them, though; we always focus there first. And it's not with our exterior, though that's the next place we look.

It's inside us, maybe buried so deep we are afraid to search for it.

The walls I erected for protection went up in part because of some negative experiences with men and boys in my childhood. When I handed these excuses to God, He gave me joy in return. And the walls crumbled.

Walls can't stand in the face of joy. It's just not possible.

Truth hit me strongly: My husband has always loved me. If something happened tomorrow and our relationship ended, I would be the better for having loved full out, for having given him access to every hidden part of me, especially those difficult emotional parts. It was this realization that became the basis for opening up, being real, connecting deeper.

I began with trepidation to reach out, heart in hand, feeling very, very fragile and way too revealed. He responded with care and love in a way that sent our relationship to new levels.

Would it have happened if I hadn't lost weight? Probably not. The emotional barriers and weight gain were so intertwined it was hard to tell where one began and the other ended. The reality is, when I was willing to remove the covering of shame, guilt, anger and frustration and reject the lie that God won't take care of me, any fear of intimacy vanished.

I know I am loved, but more than that I know I am worthy of being loved.

When I was writing *Sweet Grace*, I asked my husband what has changed since I lost weight? He answered, "I can get closer to you—physically, emotionally and spiritually." I so love that answer.

I was listening to an inner-healing session where the coach asked the woman how she felt after giving some things to God. She said, "I feel much lighter. I feel like I've lost hundreds of pounds of weight."

I have lost 260 pounds of physical weight and tons of emotional baggage. I have gained true intimacy.

I pray similar miracles happen for you when you begin to love yourself as God loves you.

How can you make that happen?

¹ Mark 12:30-31 NLT

² 1 Samuel 16:7

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